

Ash Wednesday (RCL/C): "Shall We Add or Subtract this Lent? Yes"
Matthew 6:1-21
March 5, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Here we are, standing on the diving board of Ash Wednesday, ready to plunge headfirst into Lent, and my question is, "What spiritual **math** would God like us to do? Would the Holy Spirit like us to **add** or **subtract** something from our lives in this holy season, this 40-day springtime of the soul?"

The question we're most apt to hear is, "What are you **giving up** for Lent?" Understandably we're focused on **sacrifice**, because of our Lord's sacrifice on the cross. Not that my "sacrifice" of giving up cookies or a favorite TV show is going to compare with Jesus' crucifixion.... When I was little, I kinda got the message that the more miserable my Lenten sacrifice made me, the better. I don't stand by that any more. I now understand that the goal isn't misery, it's communion, with Christ, being drawn closer to God's heart.

So the question becomes, what can I **eliminate** that distracts me from the divine Presence, or what can I **add** that will awaken me to the divine Presence? Dear Holy Spirit, what can I **do**, or **stop** doing, that will ensure I'm closer to my Lord on Easter than on Ash Wednesday? What will set me up to pray more frequently or more fervently? What should I fast from that will make me hungrier for God? What should I give away that creates more room for God in my home and life, **and** that blesses my neighbor?

The reality is that some of us do too **little** for our own spiritual good, and some of us do too **much** for our own spiritual good. **Doing too little** might look like making any excuse to skip worship, only showing up when there's nothing better to do.... Or it might look like never "finding" time, "making" time, **devoting** time to serve others in any way. Our lives aren't meant to be **only** about ourselves, **only** about making a living, or even **only** about our immediate family. In

this case, **adding** some activity to our calendar that is other-oriented may be a better Lenten bet than giving up a favorite food or drink.

Doing too much might look like running around like a chicken with its head cut off. It might look like you're continually sleep-deprived and grumpy. Your schedule might be filled with things that are very worthwhile in and of themselves, but that become soul-sapping once you put the whole shebang together. In this case, the Holy Spirit may be nudging, elbowing, pushing, pulling us to recognize that we're too busy for our own good and too busy to pay any attention to God. The Lord may be calling us to take out the spiritual potato peeler and shave something off. One of my favorite books is *The Gardening of the Soul*, and it says if we're **crazy** busy, many things may grow in the garden of our soul, but God will **not** be one of them. The springtime of our soul may require some pruning if the garden of our soul has run riot.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty was a Russian-born Christian woman who escaped Communist Russia, emigrated to Canada, and had an extraordinary, lifelong, love of and ministry among the poor. She founded Friendship Houses and Madonna Houses, Christian communities planted in impoverished places around the world. She was a social activist and civil rights reformer, a great friend of Dorothy Day. She wrote a book called *Season of Mercy: Lent and Easter*, in which she asks this question: "What is it that we have to tear out of our soul, by the roots?"¹ I like the gardening metaphor, but have to say the thought of tearing something out of my soul by the roots is pretty scary – about as comfortable as the thought of tearing out my fingernails. I like **better** what she says further along:

Lent is a corridor that leads us to the face of the Father, the face of God. You cannot come heavily laden – you were born naked, and when you die you will come naked before God. His Son died naked. So, do not carry anything. You will take before God only that which you have given away. But you are not dead yet! So meanwhile, let things drop, really drop. Then you will enter Lent with a fantastic joy. For every time you drop anything

pertaining to the wrong kind of self-fulfillment, or to the adoration of yourself, or to all the things that clutter up your life, a sense of immense joy will come to you and through you.

Seven weeks are set aside every year for us to let go of the old and to enter into the new, because God is merciful. Now we can pass over from the old life that we led before Lent, into the new life after. This “Passover” is a daily occurrence; it is not only during Lent. But Lent enhances it and makes you think. It concentrates you [if you let it!]. It brings you into the heart of God. Lent is you and I, like St. John the well-beloved, putting our head on the bosom of Christ and hearing the heartbeats of God (John 13:21-25). When you hear the heartbeats of God, you change.²

That is potentially what the Holy Spirit can make happen during Lent, by God’s grace. You are cooperating with that by being present in worship today! We are all making a good start. Who knows, maybe I’ll even come to realize that there **is** something in **my** soul that I **should** be tearing out by the roots! Perhaps I’ll trust that I’ll survive that loss and come to thrive without whatever it is I hate to lose! Or maybe I’ll realize that I’ve been giving more generously of my money than of myself. I could become aware that I’ve taken a Lone Ranger approach to my faith when God wants it to be more of a Brady Bunch experience. Or I’ll see that somewhere along the Way I’ve become a bit of a spiritual couch potato, and the Lord wants me to rise up and get some regular spiritual exercise: dwelling in Scripture, worshiping, serving! Maybe I’ll be challenged to give more sacrificially of my material blessings and my time for the sake of my faith family and the world. Who knows? As the title of a book I’m reading says, maybe I’ll start *Traveling at the Speed of Joy* instead of racing along in a frenzy. Only the Holy Spirit knows what gifts God has prepared for us to receive this Lent. Receiving the gift might involve the spiritual math of adding **or** subtracting. Only the Holy Spirit and you can say. Amen

¹ Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Season of Mercy: Lent and Easter* (Madonna House Publications, 2011), 7-8, in *Forum Letter*, Vol. 52, #3 (ALPB, March 2023), p. 1.

²Ibid.

